



Sustaining Intercultural Contact: Developing the Intercultural Communicative Competence of EFL Undergraduates in China

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Abstract: This article explores intercultural contact as a pathway for the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among EFL undergraduates in China during the post-pandemic era. Adopting an exploratory qualitative design with self-reports and focus group interviews as instruments, the challenges faced by EFL undergraduates in intercultural communication and intercultural contact pathways for ICC development were elicited with thematic analysis via NVivo. The challenges that EFL undergraduates encounter in intercultural communication are scant English proficiency, insufficient intercultural experience, and limited intercultural practise. Direct, indirect, self-engaged, and external contact have been extracted as pathways for the development of ICC among EFL undergraduates. This study provides theoretical and empirical evidence to help researchers understand intercultural contact as a way to develop the ICC of EFL undergraduates in China. The findings of this study shed light on the development of ICC in EFL learning and authentic intercultural contexts, offering lecturers and curriculum designers reference points for constructing criteria and syllabi for intercultural English teaching.

Keywords: Intercultural Contact; Intercultural Communicative Competence; EFL Undergraduates; China; The Post-Pandemic Era

1. Introduction

Globalization has accentuated the crucial role of communication due to the exponential rise in interaction between people from diverse cultures and backgrounds. Therefore, intercultural communication competence (ICC) is a necessary skill for global citizens. With a view of undergraduates in China becoming global citizens, intercultural education, particularly the incorporation of ICC into teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) in post-secondary institutes, has been a recurrent theme in some official documents issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE). In the outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020), MOE established the prerequisites for intercultural education, which aimed to enhance intercultural communication and enable Chinese students to "better understand diverse countries and cultures" (NPC, 2010: 34). In the most recent edition of the Guidelines for College English Teaching (2019 edition), the term "ICC" was cited six times. In the College English Curriculum Requirements (CECR, 2020 edition), ICC development has been gazetted as one of the ultimate objectives of TEFL.

However, the MOE has not achieved a breakthrough in terms of criteria and syllabi for intercultural education. The CECR does not identify the aspects of intercultural teaching, leaving a void in theoretical or practical guidelines on how to develop ICC (Gu & Zhao, 2021). Due to the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese government has implemented anti-pandemic policies, such as locking down cities, imposing movement restrictions, such as locking down cities and imposing movement restrictions. Consequently, EFL undergraduates' contact with native English speakers and English cultures does not go smoothly. In particular, the development of ICC among EFL undergraduates is not aligned with the global trend.

Given that ICC teaching at the tertiary level has low productivity and intercultural contact among EFL undergraduates is restricted during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need to explore the path for developing the ICC of EFL under-

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-graduates in the Chinese context. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore the challenges that EFL undergraduate students face in intercultural communication. The study will then make recommendations for feasible and practical approaches to sustaining intercultural contact for ICC development in the post-pandemic era.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings

The theoretical underpinning of the present study involves ICC and intercultural contact theories, primarily Byram's Five Savoir ICC Model (1997) and Kormos and Csizér's Intercultural Contact Theory (2007).

2.1 Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)

To better understand ICC as a concept, it is essential to delineate the interconnection among culture, communication, and English. Culture concerns behavioural patterns, beliefs, values, and traditions shared by members of a society or community (Chen, 2023; Ferraro, 1995). Culture and communication are mutually dependent in that communication is not possible without sharing and understanding among individuals. It is within the culture that individuals learn what to communicate with and, more importantly, how. On the other hand, communication is where culture is transferred and developed via verbal or nonverbal language. In the era of globalization, English as a lingua franca is crucial in intercultural communication, where people from diverse backgrounds interact with others beyond geographical and cultural boundaries.

Central to communication in the era of globalization is interculturality, which concerns the mutual understanding of differences when individuals from different origins establish relationships. ICC, the ability to negotiate meaning and sustain a shared understanding effectively and appropriately in intercultural settings (Byram, 1997), is a required expertise for EFL undergraduates, who are potentially global citizens.

ICC has been conceptualized in the fields of anthropology, psychology, and pedagogy with scholarly and practical aims. Researchers have delineated the components and ranges of ICC into models by focusing on different perspectives. According to Deardorff (2009), there are five types of ICC models: compositional models, co-orientational models, developmental models, adaptational models, and causal process models, the representative ones of which are respectively proposed by Hunter et al. (2006), Byram (1997), Bennett (1993), Kim (1988), and Arasaratnam & Banerjee (2011).

Among the many ICC models, Byram's Five Savoir Model (1997) is one of the most referenced and has been a trailblazer as it presented "a ground-breaking paradigm for language teaching" (Porto, 2013:145). The components or dimensions of ICC in Byram's model centre on five savoirs, specifically knowledge of self and others (savoirs), attitudes of openness and curiosity (savoir-être), skills of interpreting and relating (savoir comprendre), skills of discovering and relating (savoir apprendre), and critical thinking awareness (savoir's engager). Byram (1997) established five savoirs as benchmarks for the development and assessment of the ICC, particularly in the realm of foreign language teaching. As Corbett (2003) argued, these five savoirs constitute the most comprehensive specification of ICC, which incorporates all that is needed to mediate between or among cultures.

Thus, the development of the ICC among EFL undergraduates in the present study includes aspects that encompass the savoirs, respectively, intercultural knowledge, intercultural skills, intercultural attitudes, and intercultural awareness, which concerns the "predominant focus" (Deardorff, 2015:3) of ICC.

2.2 Intercultural Contact (IC)

The theory of intercultural contact originated from Allport's Intergroup Contact Hypothesis (1954), which concerns how to minimize bias in intergroup contact. IC research conducted by Vezzali et al. (2012) and Pettigrew et al. (2011) has advanced insightful theories by probing the correlations among contact, confidence, motivation, and prejudice in intercultural communication.

Despite its root in social psychology, intercultural contact theory is applicable to the field of second/foreign language learning. As Dörnyei and Csizér (2005) argued, intercultural contact serves both as a means and an end in second/foreign language studies. In 2007, Kormos and Csizér conducted a study on intercultural contact and its role in EFL learning, proposing that intercultural contact involves both direct and indirect personal contact with native or non-native speakers of the target language and contact with cultural products in the target language. In the Chinese academic arena, Peng and Wu (2016) classified intercultural contact into direct spoken contact, direct written contact, indirect personal contact, and indirect contact with media. In their subsequent research, Peng and Wu (2016), employing a structural equation modelling approach, statistically illustrated that intercultural contact, particularly indirect contact, is a strong predictor of ICC. Peng and Wu initiated correlational studies on intercultural contact and ICC in China among college students (Duan, 2019) and EFL teachers (Wang, 2018). However, previous studies on intercultural contact and the ICC of Chinese EFL learners were primarily from a quantitative perspective, collecting data using the Peng and Wu scales (2016). Qualitative studies on intercultural contact and ICC among EFL learners in China are scarce.

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered movement control policies in China, bringing EFL undergraduates challenges when they contacted native English speakers and English cultures in intercultural communication. However,

studies on intercultural contact and ICC of EFL undergraduates during the post-pandemic era are scarce. To bridge this research gap, two research questions were addressed in this study.

- What challenges do EFL undergraduates face in intercultural communication during the post-pandemic era?
- How can intercultural contact be sustained as a pathway for EFL undergraduates' ICC development in the post-pandemic era?

3. Methodology

The present study aims to identify the challenges EFL undergraduates encounter in intercultural communication and the pathways that would contribute to their ICC development. An exploratory qualitative design was employed to fulfil the research objectives. Qualitative research examines phenomena in depth, addressing the “What,” “Why,” and “How” questions (Yin, 2014). Instead of trying to support or refute a theory or assumption, this study is exploratory in nature, allowing flexibility in exploring ICC development pathways inductively.

3.1 Participants and Sampling

The participants in the present study included 10 TEFL stakeholders and 20 EFL undergraduates from five provinces in China: Fujian (southeast China), Yunnan (southwest China), Shandong (east China), Xinjiang (northeast China), and Shaanxi (northwest China).

In the present study, purposive and snowball sampling were combined. Ten TEFL stakeholders were purposively selected among researchers, lecturers, and curriculum designers, attending the 17th Annual International Conference of the China Association for Intercultural Communication in December 2021. To ensure the representativeness of the participants, a maximum variation sampling technique was adopted that involved interviewees (TEFL stakeholders) with diverse demographic backgrounds. Using a snowball sampling technique, TEFL stakeholders assigned and administered a self-report task to EFL undergraduates from different universities and regions. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to data collection. Participation in the study was voluntary. The TEFL stakeholders involved in the study were anonymized and coded as L1 to L10, while EFL undergraduates were referred to as S1 to S20 for ethical considerations. Tables 1 and 2 show the demographic profiles of the participants.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents for Interviews.

Code	Attachment	Academic Role
L1	A public university in Fujian	English department head (Full professor)
L2	A private university in Shandong	English department head (Full professor)
L3	A public university in Yunnan	English teacher for English majors (Associate professor)
L4	A public university in Xinjiang	English teacher for arts students (Associate professor)
L5	A public university in Yunnan	English teacher for science students (Associate professor)
L6	A public university in Shaanxi	English teacher for arts students (Lecturer)
L7	A private university in Fujian	English teacher for English majors (Lecturer)
L8	A private university in Yunnan	English teacher for arts students (Lecturer)
L9	A public university in Shaanxi	Curriculum designer (Full professor)
L10	A private university in Xinjiang	Curriculum designer (Associate professor)

Source: Own research

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Respondents for Self-reports.

Code	Major	Grade	Attachment
S1 S2	English majors	Sophomores	A public university in Fujian
S3 S4	English majors	Juniors	A public university in Yunnan
S5 S6	Non-English majors of arts	Freshmen	A public university in Shandong
S7 S8	Non-English majors of arts	Sophomores	A public university in Xinjiang
S9 S10	Non-English majors of arts	Juniors	A public university in Yunnan
S11 S12	Non-English majors of arts	Seniors	A public university in Shaanxi
S13 S14	Non-English majors of sciences	Freshmen	A private university in Fujian
S15 S16	Non-English majors of sciences	Sophomores	A private university in Yunnan
S17 S18	Non-English majors of sciences	Juniors	A public university in Shaanxi
S19 S20	Non-English majors of sciences	Seniors	A private university in Xinjiang

Source: Own research

3.2 Instruments

Self-reports and focus group interviews were the instruments used in the present study. Self-reports sought to understand the challenges faced by EFL undergraduates in intercultural communication, while semi-structured

interviews with focus groups of TEFL stakeholders aimed to explore the pathways for EFL undergraduates' ICC development during the post-pandemic era.

Self-reports have been widely used in social studies, particularly in the field of psychology. As a qualitative data collection technique in which participants disclose information about themselves without the researcher's interference, self-reports allow "a large quantity and breadth of data" (Paulhus & Vazir, 2007: 227). Purposively selected EFL undergraduates were required to write self-reports in no less than 500 words. Open-ended questions were designed to provoke reports. The questions encompassed the previous intercultural experiences of EFL undergraduates, with a focus on their difficulties and obstacles in intercultural communication. An example of such a question is as follows: "Are you ever unable to communicate with an English native speaker? If yes, how and why did it go?"

Focus group interviews bring together interviewees who are knowledgeable in a field as a discussion group to collect high-quality data, which primarily aids in comprehending a specific problem. According to Casey and Krueger (2000), focus group interviews create a more natural atmosphere than individual interviews, as interviewees influence others or are influenced by others, which may trigger not only holistic but also in-depth views. In the present study, there were three focus groups: group one of 2 department heads, group two of 2 curriculum designers, and group three of 6 EFL teachers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with focus groups of TEFL stakeholders, focusing on strategies for sustaining intercultural contact and developing ICC. Data from undergraduates' self-reports served as prompts for interview questions. For example, one of the interview questions from the prompts was: "Two undergraduates mentioned that they could hardly communicate physically with English native speakers due to the locking policies; What feasible ways, in your view, contribute to undergraduates' intercultural contact during the pandemic?"

4. Data Collection and Analysis

Self-reports were assigned to 25 EFL undergraduates from public and private universities located in five Chinese provinces, and 20 undergraduates (8 males and 12 females) responded to and submitted reports to the researcher via email. Approximately six rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 stakeholders at the administrative level, policy-making level, and teaching frontline. Given that English teachers empowered intercultural education in EFL classrooms, four rounds of interviews were conducted with Group 3 (GP3) English teachers. Furthermore, a round of interviews was conducted with Group 1 (GP1) department heads and a round with Group 2 (GP2) curriculum designers. Due to the pandemic, all interviews were conducted online through the Tencent Meeting, which was available to all interviewees. The duration of the interviews was approximately 45 to 60 minutes. To facilitate communication, participants were given the option to respond to questions in Chinese or English.

Data from the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. To ensure validity, the interview transcripts in Chinese were translated forward into English and then backtranslated into Chinese. Back-translated scripts were returned to the interviewees for member checks. The interview transcripts, together with the self-reports, underwent a coding process. In addition to the researcher, two external coders with a wealth of experience in qualitative data analysis and TEFL were invited to participate in coding. The intercoder coefficient, which was obtained from the number of items coded the same by three independent coders divided by the total number of items coded, was 0.92, 0.85, and 0.81, respectively, all above the benchmark of 0.75, indicating high reliability of coding.

NVivo (version 12) was used as the data analysis tool for coding and thematic analyses. The data were entered into NVivo as individual files. All 26 files (20 self-report manuscripts and 6 interview transcripts) were passed through by coders sentence-by-sentence. Subsequently, the initial and conceptual codes were extracted using open coding and axial coding. Table 3 illustrates the coding process used in this study.

Table 3: Illustration of Open Coding and Axial Coding.

Manuscripts	Initial Codes	Conceptual Codes
I didn't quite catch up; my foreign lecturer spoke super-fast. (S5) I was confused, the kind of strong accent sounded strange. (S8)	spoke super-fast strong accent sounded strange	insufficient listening comprehension
When I communicate with English people, I am often stuck with words that I don't know. (S11) When I listen to English songs and watch English movies, many words are new to me. (S1)	stuck with words many words are new	limited vocabulary
When going through <i>The Economist</i> , I sometimes have difficulties in understanding lines, even though I know all the words. (S13) I don't know the logic behind the texts. (S10)	difficulties in understanding lines logic behind texts	insufficient reading comprehension

Source: Own research

For the first research question, texts relevant to the difficulties EFL undergraduates face in intercultural communication were labelled with free nodes. A total of 129 nodes were tagged, and 36 initial codes were generated. A further combination of initial codes based on the logic relationship was done, generating eight conceptual or category codes, namely, “insufficient listening comprehension,” “limited vocabulary,” “insufficient reading comprehension,” “inadequate acquisition of intercultural knowledge,” “inadequate exposure to English cultures,” “less frequent communication with English native speakers,” “rare participation into intercultural communicative activities,” and “inadequate access to international social platform.”

For the second research question, the transcripts from the focus group interviews were proceeded in the sequence of open coding and axial coding. In open coding, transcripts were broken into small chunks based on a concept in a statement relevant to the research question. Each chunk was tagged as a node. 189 nodes were tagged. After combining nodes with similar meanings, 18 initial codes were generated. In the axial coding stage, which grouped the initial codes generated from the open coding stage into categories, 4 conceptual codes were obtained. The hierarchical relationship between the 18 initial codes and 4 conceptual codes is demonstrated in NVivo, as shown in Figure 1.

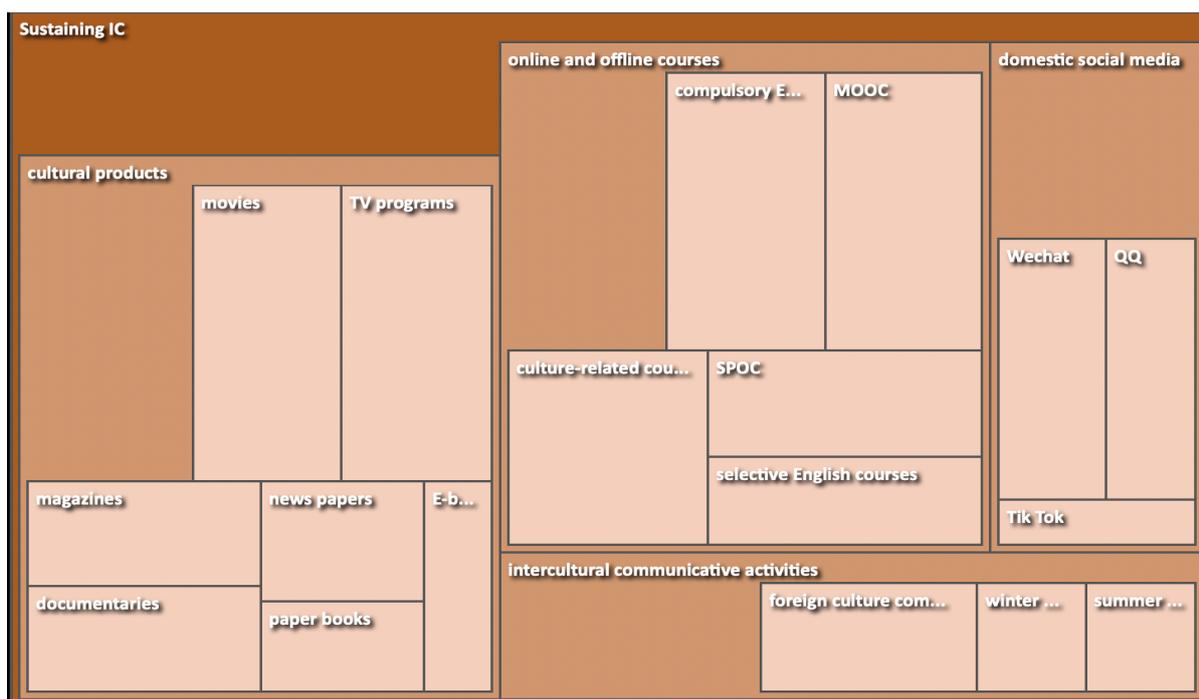


Figure 1: Hierarchy Chart of Platforms for Sustaining Intercultural Contact.

Source: Own research

As shown in the matrix, the proposed platforms of intercultural contact, based on conceptual codes that were categorized from initial codes, were cultural products, online and offline courses, domestic social networks, and intercultural communicative activities.

Through open coding and axial coding of the self-reports and interview transcripts, the main factors (in the form of codes) concerning the research questions were extracted. A thematic analysis was then conducted in the present study, which revealed answers to the research questions.

5. Discussions and Findings

To develop and identify themes, inductive analysis was used to extract key points from codes. After carefully examining the codes, those that clearly fit certain perceptions were allocated together and organized into themes. Altogether, seven themes were identified: three concerned EFL undergraduates' challenges in intercultural communication, and four concerned intercultural contact as pathways of ICC development during the post-pandemic era.

5.1 EFL Undergraduates' Challenges in Intercultural Communication

Regarding the challenges faced by EFL undergraduates in intercultural communication, three themes were elicited from the aforementioned conceptual codes: “scant English proficiency,” “insufficient intercultural experiences,” and “limited intercultural practise.” Figure 2 presents a thematic map of the NVivo.

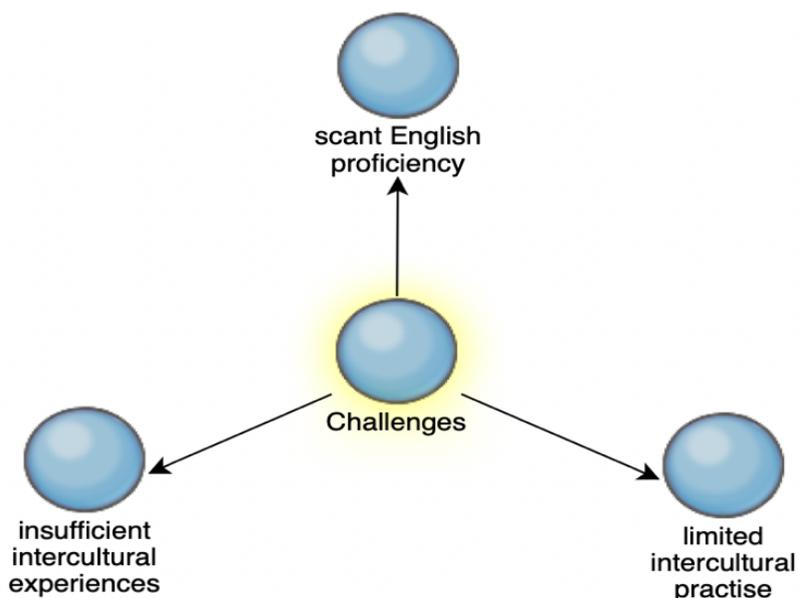


Figure 2: Challenges Faced by EFL Undergraduates in Intercultural Communication.

5.1.1 Scant English Proficiency

The greatest challenge for EFL undergraduates is their scant English proficiency. A thematic analysis of the manuscripts revealed that EFL undergraduates faced challenges stemming from language proficiency, which were reflected in limited English vocabulary and insufficient communication comprehension. Ten undergraduates stressed that vocabulary and comprehension prevented them from communicating with native English speakers and making contact with English culture.

S16 (please refer to Table 1 for information) clarified this challenge when communicating with an American foreign teacher.

“Sometimes, even though we were speaking the same language (English), I was kind of struggling to understand what my foreign teacher really meant. I still remember when he introduced the origin of Thanksgiving; some words, like ‘pilgrims,’ and ‘Puritans,’ were really new to me” (S16).

Limited English vocabulary prevents English-language students from comprehending and expressing themselves in English. S7 stated: ‘Some of the English words I use might be confusing or unclear to my foreign teacher. Sometimes I am not entirely certain if I can express myself’ (S7). Outside the university setting, S3 depicted her experience of participating in a summer camp with international students from six countries.

“I was glad that students from the University of Sydney, the University of Tennessee, and the University of Sheffield, introduced their universities impressively. When it was my turn, I was nervous as I could hardly brief the teaching buildings or the landmark of my university, that has a long history. Words concerning Chinese history are sort of hard for me” (S3).

English vocabulary, particularly vocabulary with cultural, historical, and religious denotations, is beyond what EFL undergraduates have acquired. In addition, insufficient communication comprehension was observed among undergraduates. S13 describes the embarrassing situation.

“In Shanghai, I once met a traveler from Wales. He wanted me to show him the way to a park. I couldn’t get the name of the park because he spoke with an accent. He had to type the name with his phone. When I tried to show him how to get to the park in English, he could not get me, I repeated twice, and he was still puzzled. I guess my English sounded strange to him and vice versa” (S13).

Communication is mutual, involving input and output or listening and speaking; S13’s insufficient listening and speaking skills make communication and comprehension rather difficult. A similar case is observed for S7.

“I find communicating with native English speakers is a headache. Even though I passed the College English Test (Band 4), I do not have many difficulties in English reading and writing, and I know my levels of English listening and speaking are at the basic stage, just like a toddler, but still, a lot to learn and improve” (S7).

Eighteen out of twenty EFL undergraduates revealed in their reports that they had either vocabulary or communication comprehension problems, or both, which were largely due to their unsatisfactory English proficiency. Notably, scant English proficiency is a common problem faced by EFL undergraduates in China.

5.1.2 Insufficient Intercultural Experiences

The second challenge that EFL undergraduate participants conveyed was insufficient intercultural experience. Among the 20 EFL undergraduates who participated in self-reported writing, only S3 (an English major student) had overseas experience. Less frequent communication with native English speakers and insufficient exposure to English culture were the main factors contributing to insufficient intercultural experiences.

Less frequent communication with native English speakers was because a very small number of native English speakers were working or travelling in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, communicating with foreign teachers was the main source for some EFL undergraduates to gain intercultural experience, as stated in S9:

“Before I entered university, I had never communicated with any foreigner or English native speaker before; I spoke with Chinese in Chinese all day long. Now in university, I am lucky to have a foreign teacher from New Zealand; I am eager to attend her classes; that is the only way for me to speak English with a native speaker” (S9).

Central to S9's statement was the few English native speakers that EFL undergraduates could approach, leading to their insufficient intercultural experiences. S13 showed her lack of intercultural experience with foreign teachers in class.

“I attend my foreign teacher's English classes regularly, about 90 minutes per week; however, the class size was really large, about 90 students; I seldom have the chance to answer questions and communicate with my foreign teacher after class, what a pity” (S13).

Although there were not many class hours, S9 and S13 were fortunate to have had foreign teachers. Undergraduates in some outlying regions, such as S16 (from Yunnan) and S19 (from Xinjiang), reported that there were no native English speakers; all of them learned that English-speaking countries were from English teachers of Chinese nationality or textbooks.

Textbooks serve as the main platform for EFL undergraduates to learn about diverse cultures; as reported by S3, “I don't have a foreign teacher, and I am too shy to communicate with native speakers; I understand English cultures from my English textbooks that covers some English literature works, movies, and famous English people” (S3). S5 mentioned, “apart from textbooks, I go to the library and read more about whatever I am interested in about English people and English culture” (S5).

From the above excerpts, it is evident that EFL undergraduates rarely take the initiative to communicate with English native speakers; their notions and conceptions about English people and English cultures are based on book knowledge, leading to a deficiency in their intercultural experiences.

5.1.3 Limited Intercultural Practise

The third challenge EFL undergraduates encounter in intercultural communication concerns limited intercultural practises due to their limited participation in intercultural activities and inadequate access to international social platforms.

In their self-reports, 10 EFL undergraduates showed positive attitudes towards intercultural practise. S10 wrote, ‘I am really eager to get involved in intercultural practise as I would like to seek employment in an international company after graduation’ (S10). S17 conveyed a willingness to have an internship in a cross-border company to “experience the charm of cultural diversity” (S17). However, the pandemic has inhibited such intercultural practises among EFL undergraduates to some extent.

With the enforcement of the movement control policy and the stay-at-home order in cities such as Wuhan, Shanghai, Xi'an, Guangzhou, etc., travel was banned, and social gatherings were forbidden. EFL undergraduates have very few opportunities to participate in intercultural activities. S7 stated, ‘I enjoyed attending English corners, especially those with guest native speakers in pubs, but after the outbreak of the pandemic, I no longer had such a luxury’ (S7). In a similar vein, S18, S16, and S3 expressed regret for not being able to participate in intercultural activities such as foreign culture festivals, English drama festivals, and mock UN sessions.

A further probe into self-reports revealed that not only was physical participation in intercultural activities rare among EFL undergraduates but their access to international social platforms was also rare. Mainstream international social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, YouTube, MSN, and Skype, were virgin lands for most undergraduates. Two EFL undergraduates involved in this study admitted that they had never heard of these social media platforms. The remaining 18 EFL undergraduates in their self-reports mentioned that they had never registered accounts on these platforms, let alone communicating with English native speakers, as S7 said:

“Yes, Skype and MSN are accessible for all in China. However, none of my friends and classmates are Skype and MSN users. Chinese social medium platforms as WeChat and QQ, are abundant for me; why shall I turn to these international platforms? When QQ mailbox is well enough for me, why shall I use MSN?” (S7).

Evidently, EFL undergraduates have inadequate access to international social media platforms, which facilitates their interactions with native English speakers. Getting involved in intercultural practices visually through international social networks or physically through intercultural activities is a challenge for EFL undergraduates.

5.2 Intercultural Contact as a Pathway of ICC Development

Regarding the development of ICC among EFL undergraduates, four pathways were mapped from focus group interviews with TEFL stakeholders through thematic analysis: direct intercultural contact, indirect intercultural contact, self-engaged intercultural contact, and external intercultural contact. The NVivo thematic map is shown in Figure 3.

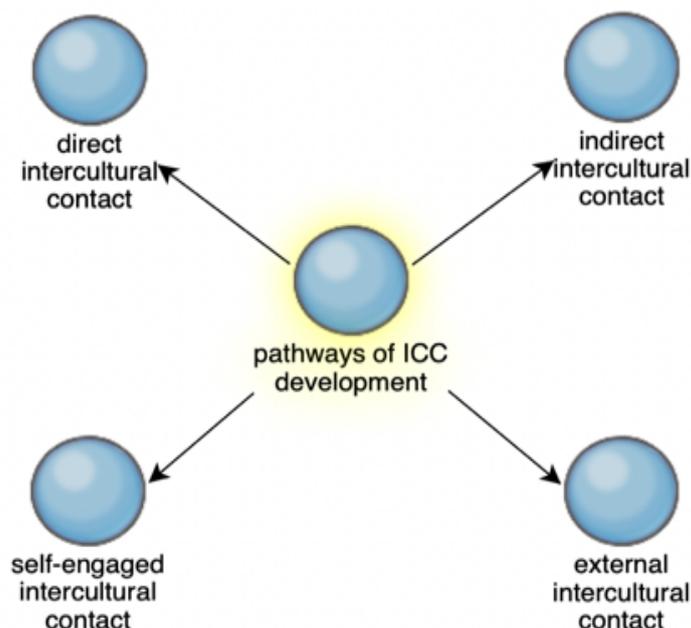


Figure 3: ICC Development Pathways for EFL Undergraduates through Intercultural Contact.

Source: Own research

5.2.1 Direct Contact and Indirect Contact

Direct and indirect contact have been a recurring theme in intercultural contact. Previous studies by Kormos and Csizer (2007) and Peng and Wu (2016) classified intercultural contact as direct and indirect, with qualitative and quantitative instruments. According to Kormos and Csizer (2007), direct contact with native and non-native speakers of the target language entails verbal interaction (spoken or written), whereas indirect contact proceeds without verbal interaction. Peng and Wu (2016), using a structural equation model, demonstrated that direct contact covered domestic and foreign social media as well as domestic and foreign intercultural communicative activities, while indirect contact concerned cultural products, multimedia, and courses. Focal differences exist in the scope or dimensions of direct and indirect contact between the previous studies and the present study.

After coding and thematic analysis of the interview data, it was revealed that direct intercultural contact refers to the interaction or communication with native English speakers physically in real-life situations or visually through online platforms. This face-to-face contact, as most interviewees in GP1 and GP2 reckoned, was effective in the development of the ICC among EFL undergraduates.

L2 (Please refer to TABLE 2 for information) from GP1 stated: “Direct contact could be the original or the earliest type of intercultural contact. Such contact makes students more easily involved in their communication. Communicating with foreign teachers is just direct contact’ (L2). L4 of GP2 mentioned, “Students can chat with native speakers online or make video calls, which is easy and convenient” (L4). L2 and L4 mentioned the effectiveness of direct contact. In addition to effectiveness, another advantage of direct contact is authenticity, as L1 from GP1 mentioned, “direct contact enables students to get first-hand materials in authentic situations” (L1), which echoes Duan’s view (2019) that direct intercultural contact between language learners avoids the negative impact of subjectivity and other intermediary factors, guaranteeing truthfulness in the language learning process.

Although effective and authentic, the availability of direct intercultural contact was a concern raised by L5 and L3 from GP2. L5 indicated that English native speakers EFL undergraduates could approach were mainly foreign teachers. L3 mentioned:

“During the pandemic era, direct contact with English native speakers physically would hardly be possible; direct online contact can be a countermeasure; however, what direct online contact matters is how to get to know and approach native speakers who are comfortable with communicating with students who are strangers” (L3).

The above excerpt draws attention to the difficulty of direct online intercultural contact. Direct online contact with native speakers, who are neither friends nor acquaintances, requires not only the language proficiency of EFL undergraduates but also communication skills. L3 explained: “Students should be aware of how to initiate communication and how to keep communication running smoothly” (L3). Evidently, sociolinguistic competence, the ability to create and understand utterances in diverse communicative contexts, is a prerequisite for such direct contact online, which is demanding for EFL undergraduates who are with the problem of scant language proficiency. On the other hand, indirect intercultural contact is relatively approachable for undergraduates with lower English proficiency.

In the present study, indirect intercultural contact involves cultural products and online courses, which is “the most accessible way for EFL students to understand native English speakers and their cultures” (L11). Indirect contact through cultural products and online courses is crucial in developing ICC during the post-pandemic era, as neither is subject to movement control policies and stay-at-home orders.

“Understanding English people with cultural products is beyond time and space, which is a pretty good way for EFL students. Students may favour English songs, books, and movies; they just feel free to read or watch and, more importantly, to enjoy what they are interested in, anytime, anywhere” (L4).

From the above excerpt, it is evident that cultural products such as paper books, e-books, magazines, newspapers, movies, and TV programs get EFL undergraduates involved in intercultural contact flexibly on their personal interests, which motivates EFL undergraduates to understand English people and English cultures. In addition, indirect contact through cultural product features with resourcefulness, which can be beneficial to EFL undergraduates, as L9 clarified: “Cultures in movies and television programmes are rich and diverse, supplementing what students acquire from textbooks or in classes” (L9). While the resourcefulness of cultural products brings possibilities for intercultural contact, it brings challenges, which is a concern raised by L10:

“The resourcefulness of cultural products may also make students’ intercultural contact less systematic and focused; not every student can think and learn independently and critically. Some students can hardly figure out what to learn, or judge the right from the wrong, or distinguish the true from the false” (L10).

The above excerpt shows the systematic and focused acquisition of intercultural knowledge through cultural products attributed to EFL undergraduates with independent learning and critical thinking skills. Online courses could be an alternative indirect intercultural contact pathway for some EFL undergraduates. L9, a GP3 curriculum designer, harbored the notion that indirect intercultural contact through online courses ensures the acquisition of intercultural knowledge on an academic and systematic basis, which is essential for ICC development. Regarding specific online courses, L10 from GP3 recommends massive open courses (MOOCs) and small private online courses (SPOCs). L10 elaborated:

“The MOOC website is the largest platform of online courses in China, incorporating intercultural related courses by professors from key universities, as ‘Intercultural Communication’ course of Beijing Union University and ‘Cultural Differences and Intercultural Communication’ course of Zhengzhou University, applicable to all undergraduates in China. For students with special need in ICC, SPOCs are available in learning APPs” (L10).

MOOCs and SPOCs are based on scale efficiency and have gained momentum after the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Ma (2020), the number of MOOC attendees soared in the post-pandemic era. Indirect intercultural contact via online courses features flexibility in learning time and efficiency in learning outcomes, making it “the most adopted intercultural contact among EFL undergraduates” (L7).

Indirect intercultural contact, owing to its flexibility and resourcefulness, has gained popularity among EFL undergraduates. According to empirical studies by Chinese scholars Deng (2015) and Wang (2018), indirect contact is the major intercultural contact among college students. Wang (2018), based on quantitative data analysis, concluded that indirect contact with native English speakers and English cultures had a positive effect on all dimensions of the ICC.

In the present study, indirect and direct contact are two separate themes: the former is based on an artifact and the latter on an interpersonal basis, both contributing to the development of the ICC of EFL undergraduates. Further exploration and analysis of the data collected from stakeholders in TEFL returned two more themes, self-engagement contact and external contact, each playing a role in ICC development.

5.2.2 Self-Engaged Contact and External Contact

Intercultural contact in the context of English as foreign language concerns contact with English natives and their culture (Peng & Wu 2016). Contact with native speakers verbally or non-verbally involves social engagement; however, contact with the culture of native English speakers can be either on an interpersonal premise or on an artifact premise. What scaffolds contact with English native speakers and contact with English cultures differs. The difference in the premises or scaffolds of intercultural contact generates two new themes: self-engaged contact and external contact.

“I think contact can be divided into two types. One is a one-sided contact. For example, the students watching English movies or reading some international news is one-sided contact which, to some extent, expands their knowledge. And another type is two-sided contact. This refers to, for example, some social media where they could contact friends or they wanna add strangers from other countries and talk to them through those social media or social apps” (L3).

In the above scenario, L3 used the phrase “one-sided contact” to refer to situations where EFL undergraduates are not socially engaged in intercultural contact, whereas “two-sided contact” in L3’s proposition is on a communicative premise involving social engagement with English native speakers in intercultural contact. In this paper, L3 referred to as “one-sided contact” is defined as “self-engaged contact”, while “two-sided contact” is defined as “external contact”. Based on a thematic analysis of interview transcripts, self-engaged contact in the present study involves EFL undergraduates’ spontaneous contact with English cultures via cultural products, artifacts, and online courses, while external contact in the present study refers to EFL undergraduates’ contact with English native speakers and their cultures physically in daily communications, in the cyber world through social media, or on campus with offline courses.

The platforms for self-engaged contact overlap indirect contact to some degree; however, self-engaged contact emphasizes the spontaneity of EFL undergraduates and the dual identity of being initiators and recipients in intercultural contact. L6 of GP2 clarified, “although teachers may recommend students some reference books or movies for culture learning, it is the willingness or motivation of the students that really works’ (L6). EFL undergraduates’ motivation for academic success or future careers is a driving force for them to be autonomous learners in self-directed contact, which “may otherwise be dull, as there are no other participants” (L8).

On the other hand, external contact was achieved with the native speakers. Central to external contact is “getting English native speakers involved” (L7) in authentic communication. The platforms for external contact converge to those of direct contact in terms of physical and visual communication with native speakers in real life and in the cyber world. However, another platform for external contact based on coding and thematic analysis involves English or culture-related courses under foreign teachers or Chinese teachers offline. Such courses are available in, according to L10, a curriculum designer from GP3:

*“Compulsory course curriculum as *College English* for non-English major learners, *Advanced English* for English major learners, and in the elective course curriculum as *Introduction to Major English-Speaking Counties* and *Contrast of China and Western Cultures*” (L10).*

English or culture-related courses that take the offline form are in the classroom setting, involving teachers’ imparting of language or culture knowledge to EFL undergraduates and, more importantly, the interaction between teachers and undergraduates or between undergraduates and undergraduates. Contact with English cultures via offline courses is thus categorized as external contact.

In brief, although self-engaged contact is of a spontaneous nature and external contact is of an interactive nature, each plays a role in EFL undergraduates’ understanding of English native speakers and English cultures. Direct, indirect, self-engaged, and external contact are indispensable pathways for the development of ICC among EFL undergraduates.

6. Findings

EFL undergraduates were affected by their scant English proficiency, insufficient intercultural experience, limited intercultural practise in communication with native English speakers, and contact with English cultures during the pandemic. Countermeasures were elicited through four intercultural contact pathways: direct contact, indirect contact, self-engaged contact, and external contact. This section focuses on the adoptability of these four pathways in developing the ICC of EFL undergraduates during the post-pandemic era.

Byram (1997) showed that ICC development is mediated by the enhancement of intercultural knowledge, attitudes, awareness, and skills. As for the present study, the development of ICC for EFL undergraduates involves the expansion of intercultural knowledge, increase of intercultural awareness, maintenance of positive intercultural attitudes, and honing of intercultural skills. The adaptability of intercultural contact pathways in ICC development during the post-pandemic era is illustrated in Figure 4.

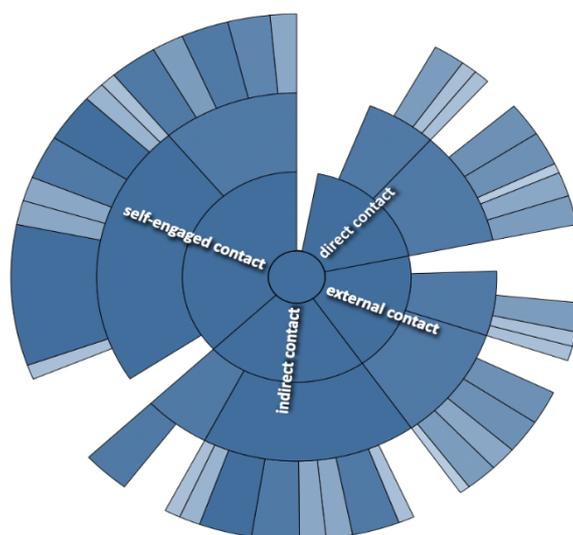


Figure 4: Sunburst of intercultural contact pathways for ICC development.

Source: Own research

A sunburst is a radial map in NVivo that presents data in rings. The rings are divided into segments that represent themes or codes. The sunburst diagram indicates the proportional number of coding references, visualizing the contributing segments of intercultural contact pathways to ICC development during the post-pandemic era.

Self-engaged contact in the sunburst diagram occupies the largest area, illustrating that it has the most coding references, which means that it is the most referenced intercultural contact pathway. Indirect contact ranks as the second most referred to pathway. External and direct contact share almost equally, and not in small proportions in the sunburst diagram, demonstrating that their adoptability in ICC development cannot be undermined.

The platforms of self-engaged and indirect contact converge to cultural products and online courses, indicating that cultural products and online courses are the most accessible platforms for ICC development. Cultural products and online courses contribute to the expansion of EFL undergraduates' intercultural knowledge, foregrounding their intercultural awareness and skills. According to Peng (2022), cultural products such as films and books exemplify customs, etiquette, and other cultural traits of English communities, demonstrating cultural similarities and differences. Ren and Liang's (2014) research on the effects of an international telecollaboration course on ICC revealed that online courses contributed to students' intercultural sensitivity and intercultural effectiveness. The accessibility of cultural products and online courses during the pandemic makes them crucial platforms for intercultural contact, augmenting the roles of self-engaged contact and indirect contact as the most adopted pathways for the development of ICC. However, the role of direct and external contact as holistic ICC development pathways is evident. Scholars have considered direct and external contact platforms as effective ICC development pathways. Hu (2013) highlighted that direct spoken contact with native English speakers is one of the best ways to develop ICC. Meng and Zhang (2015) noted that communication with native English speakers through media such as Weblog and WeChat diversified intercultural contact, which is crucial to improving the ICC of English learners. This study posits direct and external contact on interpersonal and communicative premises, which ensures individuals' honing of intercultural skills in physical or visual communications.

The upsurge in the COVID-19 pandemic, while presenting challenges to the ICC development of EFL undergraduates, also presents new possibilities for maintaining intercultural contact. Each of the aforementioned intercultural contacts is an indispensable pathway for developing the ICC of EFL undergraduates during the post-pandemic era.

7. Conclusions

This qualitative study investigated the challenges EFL undergraduates encountered in intercultural communication in the post-pandemic era and explored the pathways of intercultural contact that contributed to ICC development. It was revealed that scant English proficiency, insufficient intercultural experience, and limited intercultural practise were the challenges EFL undergraduates faced in communicating with native English speakers and contacting English cultures during the post-pandemic era. Scant English proficiency lies in the limited vocabulary and insufficient listening/reading comprehension of EFL undergraduates. EFL undergraduates' inadequate exposure to English culture and less frequent communication with native English speakers accounted for their insufficient intercultural experience. Rare participation in intercultural communication activities and inadequate access to international social platforms during and after the COVID-19 pandemic led to limited intercultural practises among EFL undergraduates. Regarding feasible ways of

developing ICC, four intercultural contact pathways were generated: direct contact through native speakers, indirect contact through cultural products and online courses, self-engaged contact through cultural artifacts, and external contact through social media platforms and offline courses. Among the four pathways, self-engaged contact and indirect contact, which are easily accessible to EFL undergraduates during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, are the most referred pathways, both of which are crucial in expanding the intercultural knowledge of EFL undergraduates. However, direct contact and external contact, which get EFL undergraduates involved in authentic intercultural communication, contribute to the improvement of EFL undergraduates not only in intercultural knowledge but also in intercultural attitudes, awareness, and skills.

ICC is complex in nature, with multiple layers and dimensions. Therefore, ICC development among EFL undergraduates is multifaceted and involves intercultural contact pathways in TEFL and authentic communication with native speakers. As has been iterated, intercultural contact is a means rather than an end to ICC development. In this sense, the implementation of intercultural contact in TEFL and the feasibility of intercultural contact in EFL undergraduates' intercultural communication deserve further study. It is important to note that developing a strong understanding of different cultures is essential to prevent stereotypes and biases in intercultural contact. Therefore, further research should be conducted to explore strategies to improve the critical intercultural awareness of EFL undergraduates.

This study had several limitations. On the one hand, the samples were obtained from five provinces in China, suggesting that future studies may incorporate a larger and more diverse sample from other provinces, particularly those in central China. On the other hand, this cross-sectional study did not provide information on the developmental patterns of ICC over time. Conducting longitudinal studies in the future would be valuable for examining intercultural contact as a pathway for ICC development.

The present study provides empirical and theoretical evidence for researchers to understand intercultural contact as a pathway for developing the ICC of EFL undergraduates in China. The present study also reinforces intercultural contact theories by eliciting self-engaged and external contact as intercultural contact pathways, which is of significant value. Furthermore, this study serves as a reference point for educational administrators and curriculum designers to construct criteria and syllabi for intercultural teaching in Chinese universities.

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